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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes disability support services in higher education to provide administrators with a clearer understanding of disability support services and the legal requirements for their institutions to provide accommodations to students with disabilities. It begins by discussing the rapid growth in the number of college students with disabilities and in the number of post-secondary disability service providers. Requirements under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 are reviewed and include the stipulation that any post-secondary institutions receiving federal dollars must provide qualified students with disabilities an equal educational opportunity. Provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act are also described, including the assurance that an individual with a disability cannot be prevented from competing with others as long as he or she meets the same qualifications. The obligation of the student with a disability to identify and document the disabling condition and to request reasonable accommodations is discussed, along with possible accommodations. The paper closes by describing the role of the disability service administrator in determining student eligibility for protection, such as analyzing documentation to ensure that it supports the claim of disability, deciding the nature of reasonable accommodations, and developing institutional policies and procedures. (CR)

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# An Analysis of Disability Support Services in Higher Education

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Abstract

Due to the significant growth in the number of students with disabilities entering higher education and the accompanying increase in higher education disability personnel who ensure these students are provided equal educational opportunity, it is important for higher education administrators to understand the roles, functions, responsibilities, and goals of higher education disability service providers. Higher education administrators must also be aware of the knowledge and skills required of disability support services personnel in post-secondary education. The purpose of this article is to provide an analysis of disability support services in higher education so that administrators have a clearer understanding of these services and the legal requirements for their institutions to provide accommodations to students with disabilities. Through this analysis, it is hoped that higher education administrators will have the knowledge necessary to ensure that their institutions effectively serve students with disabilities.

An Analysis of Disability Support Services in Higher Education

As the number of students with disabilities successfully completing their secondary education has grown, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of students with disabilities continuing their studies at a college or university (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). The number of full-time college freshman with disabilities has reached 9.2%, up from 2.6% in 1978 (Szymanski, Hewitt, Watson, & Swett, 1999). Growth in the number of students with disabilities entering higher education has fueled a need for post-secondary personnel who work to ensure these students are provided equal educational opportunity (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). Disability support services at colleges and universities play an important role in facilitating access of students with disabilities to higher education (Szymanski et al., 1999).

The rapid growth in both the number of college students with disabilities as well as the number of post-secondary disability service providers has been heavily influenced by the passage of legislation protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). This legislation impacts directly on the university's responsibility to make education accessible to students with disabilities (Frank & Wade, 1993). For instance, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 stipulates that any post-secondary institution receiving federal dollars must provide qualified students with disabilities an equal educational opportunity (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). Post-secondary institutions must make such modifications to their academic requirements as are necessary to ensure that such requirements do not discriminate or have the effect of discriminating, on the basis of disability, against a qualified student with a disability (Frank & Wade). These modifications may include appropriate academic adjustments such as the provision of course substitutions, adaptation of instruction methods, and modifications in the length of time for the completion of requirements; or the provision of auxiliary aids such as taped texts, sign

language interpreters, guide dogs, use of tape recorders, readers or writers (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, & Yahaya, 1989). If needed, the preceding modifications must be provided in order to ensure that qualified students with a disabilities have the opportunity for full and equal participation and benefit at the higher education institution (Frank & Wade, 1993).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed into law in 1990, extends the Rehabilitation Act's anti-discrimination prohibition to all private and public colleges and universities regardless of receipt of federal funds (Frank & Wade, 1993). The ADA is an outcome-neutral law that simply ensures that an individual with a disability will not be prevented from competing with others as long as he or she meets the same qualifications (Gordon & Keiser, 1998). For colleges and universities already covered by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the ADA will not effect many changes, since most of the ADA's terms, concepts, and definitions come directly from the implementing regulations of Section 504 (Frank & Wade, 1993). Under both the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act, the provision of services to students with disabilities in post-secondary education places legal obligations on the student with the disability, the post-secondary institution, and sometimes the state vocational rehabilitation agency (Frank & Wade, 1993). With regard to modifications, it is important to note that the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA allow for institutional flexibility in choosing the methods by which academic adjustments and auxiliary aids are supplied, and post-secondary institutions are not required to provide devices or services of a personal nature (Frank & Wade, 1993).

It is the obligation of the student with a disability to identify and document the disabling condition and to request reasonable accommodations (Gordon & Keiser, 1998). Most institutions stipulate that the documentation not be more than 3 years old (Gordon & Keiser, 1998). This reflects the need to establish current impairment. Once a student has identified a disabling

condition in a timely manner, has documented it adequately, and has requested specific academic adjustments and auxiliary aids, it is then the obligation of the post-secondary institution to determine what, if any, academic adjustments and auxiliary aids are appropriate for the disabling condition (Frank & Wade, 1993). Such decisions must also take into consideration the essential nature of the educational program in question (Frank & Wade, 1993). For example, post-secondary institutions are not obligated to waive course requirements, or academic or non-academic standards, as long as they can be shown to be essential to the program of study (Frank & Wade, 1993).

The disability services professional in higher education wears many different professional hats. Individuals in this role must possess skills and knowledge in the areas of administration, direct service, consultation/collaboration, and institutional awareness (McGuire, 1998). Disability service administrators interact with students on a regular basis. Whether in the initial intake interview or as part of an ongoing supportive relationship, disability service administrators play a pivotal role in ensuring equal access within the context of reasonable accommodations (McGuire, 1998). According to McGuire (1998), disability service administrators must determine a student's eligibility for protection under the ADA/Section 504, analyze documentation to ensure that it reasonably supports the claim of disability, decide the nature of reasonable accommodations on a case-by-case basis, and develop institutional policies and procedures. In 1994, the process of developing professional standards, program standards, and a code of ethics for post-secondary disability personnel was initiated (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). Professional standards and a code of ethics are now in place (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). In a survey of Offices for Students with Disabilities, respondents indicated that they were most often trained in counseling (26%), law (17%), or social work (17%). Special education (16%), higher education (14%), and

rehabilitation counseling (13%) followed closely (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). Given this diversity, ongoing professional training is critical if disability services personnel are to ethically and fairly discharge the duties of their position (McGuire, 1998).

Disability services personnel must also work closely with faculty in order to ensure that qualified students with disabilities are not discriminated against. Stage and Milne (1996) observed that college faculty often have negative attitudes and perceptions toward students with disabilities. Studies have found faculty unwillingness to allow extra time for examinations and papers for students with learning disabilities (Stage & Milne, 1996). Other researchers maintain that students with physical disabilities are often treated differently and thus receive a different level of education (Hart & Williams, 1995). Faculty often appear more anxious about accommodating students with learning disabilities for fear of lowering academic standards (Szymanski et al., 1999). Disability support services clearly plays a role in faculty willingness to accommodate. Faculty need additional information on what to expect as well as how to manage and accept the differences between those with disabilities and those without disabilities (Hart & Williams, 1995). Research has concluded that faculty would like to be more involved with the process of service provision and have more frequent interactions with the office of disability support services (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). Faculty have also expressed a general desire to be better educated regarding issues relevant to students with disabilities (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). Szymanski et al. (1999) found that the services of a disability service office are important to faculty and instructional academic staff. Therefore, it is recommended that future research address the need for training of university faculty by disability student services personnel in order to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to post-secondary education.

Because issues of eligibility, equal access, and reasonable accommodations are so complex, it is appropriate for higher education personnel to collaborate in ensuring nondiscriminatory but sensible treatment of students with disabilities (McGuire, 1998). Keeping the process fair requires collaboration between students, disability services personnel, higher education administrators, and faculty. Disability support services are uniquely designed to uphold reasonable standards and strict compliance with the law. In order to ensure that qualified students with disabilities have the opportunity for full and equal participation and benefit at post-secondary institutions, higher education administrators must have a detailed understanding of disability support services. Such knowledge will help protect the integrity of the entire process, thereby benefitting the student and university alike.

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